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THE CURSE OF MEMORY¹

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In spite of the apparent ferocity of my title, I do not propose to attack either the value of a good memory or the practice of devoting a reasonable amount of time and energy to its cultivation. No one needs to be convinced of the convenience in ordinary life, business or domestic, of a power of accurate recollection of persons, places, and events; and no scholar is likely to underestimate the fundamental importance of being able to command the results of his professional reading or experiment. But it is true that memory as mere storage can easily be too highly valued: its usefulness is dependent upon its accessibility, upon the facility with which one can exercise the power of association. A brilliant and subtle American scholar some time ago employed an ingenious figure to illustrate the difference between the old conception of memory and that offered by more modern psychologists. We used to regard the memory, he said, as a kind of parcel room, in which we deposited pieces of information and received a check. Later, on presentation of the check, the piece was returned to us precisely in its previous condition. The modern way is to conceive of the memory rather as an incubator in which we deposit eggs, and when we come back for them we find they have in the meanwhile been hatched. Not only that, but the chickens may have grown up and bred among themselves. In other words, without conscious guidance by us, facts and ideas, lodged in our memories, have formed new combinations, and we find ourselves in possession of conclusions and convictions arrived at we know not how. Further, the philosophers of the sub-conscious argue, such conclusions and convictions, dependent as they are upon our temperament and personality, are more char-

¹ Notes of a paper read before the National Council of Teachers of English, New York, December 1, 1916.

acteristic of us and are cherished by us far more tenderly than the conclusions at which we arrive by explicit logical reasoning.

It appears that the psychologists are not yet agreed among themselves as to the extent and validity of these supposedly sub-conscious activities; yet it seems to the layman that everyday experience bears testimony to the fact that memory is not a mere matter of storage. And, even on the old theory, it is clear that great importance attaches to order and accessibility in the store-room, so that, when the check is presented, the right parcel may be immediately forthcoming. In other words, the teacher who is most impressed with the value of training the memory cannot refuse responsibility for training also the power of classification, the perceiving of relations among acquired facts, and the capacity for making quick and fertile associations.

Now my first complaint is that we have been accustomed to credit ourselves with results in memory training, not troubling about the cultivation of these further processes without which mere storage is of very little use. We have sought to stock the mind of a pupil as the old-fashioned librarian used to stock his library: he accumulated and accumulated, and he made no catalogue. The modern librarian spends half his resources on making his collections accessible. We have to do the same. We have no right to demand the pupil's time and energy for the acquiring of facts without making sure of the power of seeing the relations of these facts and getting at them when wanted.

My second point is that exercises for mere memory training are unnecessary, and hence that those parts of our programs that have no defense but memory training ought to make place for things of more value. Apart from the view urged by recent educational psychologists that there is no proof that memory power trained in one department of knowledge can be made available in another, I am convinced that mere memory exercises are a waste of time because of the fact that these exercises are supplied in abundance in the course of other disciplines. It is difficult, if not impossible, to point to any branch of study, whatever its professed aim and value, which does not involve the constant employment of memory. Subjects cultivated for the sake of the reason, like mathematics,

involve a large amount of remembering, for as we go on from proposition to proposition we must carry with us the proved results of the earlier demonstrations. Arithmetic, as usually taught, is much more a matter of memory than of reasoning, and yet on the ground of its supposed value in developing logical power, and of the handful of devices that are used in actual life, it is permitted to absorb a shockingly large proportion of the time of our elementary schools. The study of languages cannot be pursued without a vast amount of memorizing, yet the most successful language teaching is that where the element of conscious memorizing is least obtruded. Even in the practice of such arts as music and drawing, a close consideration of the student's processes will show that memory is involved at every step.

The inference that has been drawn from this omnipresence of the element of remembering has been that, since memory is so essential in all branches of study, the first thing to do is to cultivate it. The proper inference is almost the contrary: that since we can study nothing without exercising memory, it is perfectly safe to ignore it, and concentrate our attention on the selection of other values, confident that the incidental call for remembering will provide all the exercise required.

These general considerations on the exaggerated amount of attention given to the cultivation of memory are applicable to the school and college curriculum in general: what I want chiefly to say concerns the teaching of English. Our subject has its special dangers as it has its special opportunities, and it is, I believe, worth while to see how the general danger we have been discussing manifests itself in the English classroom and leads us to miss our opportunities. My thesis is that in all branches of English teaching the tendency is for the dull or lazy teacher and the dull or lazy pupil to substitute memory for other and more fruitful forms of intellectual activity.

Perhaps this is most obvious in the teaching and study of literature. When a text is studied intensively, what we are primarily seeking to do is to follow the thought and feeling of the author as fully and as precisely as possible. For this it is necessary to study the language, to get modern equivalents for archaisms, to note

changes in idiom, to know the derivation of a word when our author's use of it lies nearer its origin than does the modern use, to disentangle difficult grammatical constructions. All this, properly used, is illuminating for the literature studied, and at the same time can be an admirable discipline in thoroughness. Further, we must understand allusions, and acquire such familiarity with the personality and times of the author as to make it easier to see from his point of view. Here the acquiring of historical information is less important than the exercise of the imagination.

But in place of these valuable activities what is it that we often find? The pupil memorizing the notes, and the teacher conducting a recitation by a mechanical testing of that memorizing.

When literature is read more rapidly, for interest in argument or plot or character and the enjoyment of the broader qualities of style, a similar tendency easily appears. A speech of Burke's may be supposed to brace the reasoning faculties as well as to rouse the feelings appealed to by eloquence. To bring about these results there is necessary an effort of imagination to translate one's self to another time and place, an effort of the intellect to follow all the devices of persuasion. The teacher has to be on the watch for every chance to add vividness to the realization of the scene, to add zest to the tracking of the argument. Instead, we find too often the memorizing of a prepared outline, conned apart from the text, and the cramming of the dry bones of history and biography.

The committing of passages of fine poetry and prose is often praised as a commendable part of studies in English, and indeed one cannot furnish a student's mind with anything more likely to influence beneficially his taste and ideals. But even this is dangerous, because it so readily becomes the setting of a task easily tested, and because it is often unaccompanied by the assurance that the passages are understood and appreciated.

The dangers are less obvious in composition, but are not wholly absent. Oral composition has to be guarded lest it degenerate into repetition by rote without actual thought at the time of delivery. Written composition ought, of all our branches, to be that where the intrusion of mere memory work is most easily avoided. Yet

here too it appears. In our search for methods to abridge the tedious explanation of mistakes, we compile and number rules and refer the sinner to these. Doubtless this can be and is used effectively, but it clearly opens the door to a mechanical use of the memory as a substitute for thinking out the reason why a construction is wrong, or for striving to feel that it jars on the sense of correct writing.

I have said that these are tendencies among dull and lazy teachers, and since dull and lazy teachers never come to such meetings as this, I might seem to be wasting my time and yours. But as liars are not the only people who occasionally lie, so dull teachers are not the only ones who occasionally grow dull. The most energetic of us has his tired hours; the most resourceful is at times perfunctory. So even for members of a National Council it is worth while to consider where danger lies and how it may best be guarded against.

What, then, is the appropriate defense against this persistent and insidious tendency of teaching to degenerate into the hearing of lessons?

First and last, I believe this defense lies in the realization that our chief service is in training pupils to think. This is, of course, no monopoly of the teacher of English; but his opportunity to render it is peculiar. The subject-matter of no other department comes home so intimately to "the business and bosom" of the student. We are dealing with the language he uses every waking hour; we are dealing with the literature that lies open at his hand. That literature deals with the motives and actions that he finds in the society in which he lives; that language he finds a need to command in speech and writing from the moment he feels impelled to enter into effective relations with his fellows. Teachers of most other subjects have the handicap of having to introduce alien topics, to make these attractive, or to convince of their utility. We are free from this handicap—if we take pains to avail ourselves of that freedom.

Training in thinking—that is three-fourths of our task, and the most fundamental part of it. Once we have induced our students to use their brains, the rest is easy—whether it is the mastering of the character of Macbeth or the avoidance of the unrelated par-

ticipate. Nothing, however, is more difficult, or requires more patience and persistence. Rousseau is reported to have said that he found thinking a painful occupation, without charm. It was much easier to feel, and much more pleasant. In this respect, his disciples are legion.

The great hindrance is, of course, not the student's stupidity, but his lack of training in concentration. His mind is in a continual flutter, glancing now here now there, picking up the surface meaning of one sentence, reading the next three without effort to comprehend, returning, like a sea gull swooping down to the surface of the water, for only a moment, then up and off again. This is what the ordinary student calls reading.

What we have to do is to steady this fluttering instrument, to induce it to focus on phrase after phrase, sentence after sentence. We must cultivate unwillingness to let a word go while it is at all vague. The method necessary seems sometimes absurdly infantile. Questions must be asked to make sure that the reader realizes why one sentence follows rather than precedes another: at all costs the sequence of thought must be followed. To make this worth while, literature of solid content must be employed, for superficiality and lack of logic are soon exposed. Painful as the process is at first, it is astonishing how soon a pupil thus forced to apply himself finds a zest in tracking a robust and sinewy thinker, a triumphant scorn in seeing through a weak or flabby one.

Training in concentrated attention, then, in close unflagging following of an author's thought—that is the first step. The next is the application of the thought thus absorbed, the fitting it into the world of the pupil's previous thought and observation. Limited as may be the experience of life which we can take for granted, there will be in books well chosen for each age few ideas which cannot be related in some way to the things that have been thought or felt by the student. Differences of setting, of circumstance, time, and place, are only so many stimulants to the imagination, and Coleridge's fundamental principle of finding likenesses among differences and differences among likenesses can be employed at a very elementary stage. Most questions of conduct can be paralleled in the family or school life of the pupil; types of character

in fiction can be compared with similar types in real life; contrasts can be drawn between cities, landscapes, societies as pictured in books and those familiar to the reader in his own experience. The danger to be combated is the substitution of the remembering of words and names for the vivid realization of things and persons. This is the curse of memory, that it enables students to present a semblance of knowledge by the echoing of terms without any real assimilation of facts or images, and without any of the enlargement of personality which such assimilation makes possible.

The two powers I have been insisting on in the teaching of reading are equally important in the teaching of writing. A student trained to follow the sequence of thought, to get the full value of every word, to translate ideas into the terms of his own experience, will, when he comes to compose, be fortified against the besetting sins of the young writer. He will detect his own incoherence and disorder, his misplaced emphasis, his lack of logic; he will use words with a firmer grip on their meaning; and, most of all, he will be forewarned against mere verbosity. From an early period on to old age we are subject to the temptation to substitute words for ideas; to link together phrases that are not really symbols of living thought; and nothing but persistent questioning as to what in fact is really meant can save us. When we are dealing with matters, not of reason, but of the imagination, a similar drastic self-examination is needed. We are constantly using figures of speech, or words denoting colors, sounds, and other appeals to the senses. In order to induce a habit of imaginative sincerity, we must frequently hold up the student and make sure that the image really comes before the mind's eye, that the sound is really heard by the mind's ear. All of these matters, both intellectual and imaginative, are equally important for reading and writing; and the more technical affairs of grammar, usage, and punctuation, when related as they can be to training in thinking, have the same double bearing. We have thus some light thrown on the question of the separation of the teaching of composition and the teaching of literature. In view of the identity of the fundamental powers involved in these two disciplines, the allotment of them to different teachers and different departments seems to me a grave mistake.

There is, however, another cause of the exaggerated emphasis upon memory than lack of energy or lack of resource in teacher and pupil—the written examination. I suppose we have all had periods of protest against examinations, and again periods of realization of their value. I am certainly not going to argue this question over again now. But it is worth noting the bearing of it upon our present subject. However rationally we may have taught a piece of literature in class, however we may have exerted ourselves to use it as a means of training in reason and imagination and the powers of association, it is difficult to set a paper on it in which memory does not count for 75 per cent. A partial remedy for this can be found in reducing the importance of the examination in proportion to the recitation in determining the pupil's grade.

But when we deal with examinations not conducted by the teacher—such examinations as those for admission to college, this means of alleviation is not available. A composition test can indeed be made a fair means of judging the power acquired, but a literary examination on prescribed texts almost inevitably puts a premium on mere memory. The only escape that I can see lies in the greater use of sight passages on which the student may exercise his power of penetrating language to the idea, and following the sequence of thought. From this point of view, it is gratifying to see the increase in the use of the so-called comprehensive style of entrance examinations, at the expense of the older method with its invitation to cramming.

I may seem to have wandered far from my announced topic, yet I think the connection is not really remote. For at every turn in our attempt to realize our opportunities as teachers of English—to train in orderly and consecutive thinking, in vivid and lively imagining, in clear and significant expression—we are beset by temptations to substitute for these arduous tasks the mechanical exercise of memory. It is not the furnishing of our minds with indispensable materials, but the abuse by which memory is made an end instead of a means, that has led me to speak of it as a curse.